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The 'Class Struggle' in Africa : An Examination of Conflicting Theories

by KENNETH W. GRUNDY*

WELL over 50 years ago, John Mensah Sarbah, a Gold Coast lawyer, romantically described the traditional social order in these terms: 'In the African social system the formation of a pauper class is unknown, nor is there antagonism of class against class.'¹ Similar views still prevail throughout most of Africa and the western world. Moreover, a rationale based on this ostensible 'classlessness' is employed by Africa's leaders to justify single-party rule and the repression of dissident elements in society, and to explain and defend policies of African socialism.

The purpose of this article is to discuss briefly: (1) the relevance and utility of class analysis in the study of African political affairs; (2) current African approaches to the class struggle, as represented by the views of the leaders and spokesmen of West Africa's ruling régimes; and (3) the Soviet view of the class struggle in tropical Africa. It does not seek to advance a systematic theory of class analysis that can be adapted to African conditions, but merely to provoke some thought about an approach that heretofore has been neglected by students of African politics and economics. The general discussion is restricted to an examination of West African socio-political theories, but much of what is treated here can be applied, suitably modified to meet local conditions, to other parts of Africa.

SOCIAL CLASS ANALYSIS AND AFRICAN AFFAIRS

Largely because of its unfortunate association with Marxism, the concept of 'class' as a tool of socio-political analysis has been discredited among many contemporary western scholars, especially in the United States. This is a relatively recent development.² Class analysis was not created by Karl Marx. Aristotle was perhaps the first political theorist to view political phenomena in terms of class interests. Various concepts of class can be found in the writings of Alexander Hamilton, James

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¹ Quoted by Kwame Nkrumah, 'The Future of African Law', in *Voice of Africa* (Accra), II, 4, April 1962, p. 14.

² Vernon Aspaturian, 'Revolutionary Change and the Strategy of the *Status Quo*', in Laurence W. Martin (ed.), *Neutrality and Nonalignment: the new states in world affairs* (New York, 1962), p. 176.

Madison, John C. Calhoun, Henry George, Thorstein Veblen, and William Graham Sumner, in addition to those of European scholars, such as Gaetano Mosca, Max Weber, R. H. Tawney, and Karl Mannheim.¹ The relative decline of class analysis among western thinkers and writers can be attributed, in large measure, to the rise of the Soviet Union and Marxist-Leninist ideology as the foremost challenge to the capitalist social order prevailing in the west.² Because of this threat, Marxists have been able almost to monopolise and stigmatise class analysis by linking it with a programme of revolution to overthrow capitalism. In rejecting the prognosis of revolution, some westerners have repudiated class as a tool of empirical analysis.

In spite of the greater attention Africa has enjoyed of late, relatively few scholars have delved into the political ramifications of Africa's social class structures, and many of these have been Marxist Africanists and policy-makers.³ As a result, and because of the deceptive nature of Africa's pre-capitalist social structure, it has been argued by African nationalists and others that African societies are 'classless', and that class analysis has no validity or utility for the study of African politics. This ideological position is characteristic of the élite in many régimes (capitalist, socialist, and under-developed alike), who seek to rationalise, justify, and consolidate their dominant positions. Although this will be treated more carefully below, an off-hand rejection of class analysis appears to rest on a too limited use of the term 'class'. All societies, in spite of exhortations to the contrary, are characterised by social divisions arising out of common social, economic, and political conditions that definitively determine or at least influence each individual's political viewpoint. Often these stratifications are fluid and can be altered in the course of a generation or even less, but they are none the less

¹ Although few of these men discussed 'class' or social stratification in exactly the same terms, or shared a common terminology, they all employed what can be justifiably regarded as essentially a class mode of analysis. Their common denominator was the ability to see societies structured along class lines—essentially products of economic, political, and social divisions which tended to shape political decisions along characteristic lines.

² A recent trend among American scholars, particularly among contemporary political sociologists, has served to resurrect class analysis. See Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: the social basis of politics* (New York, 1960), and C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York, 1957), among others.

³ For example, the notable work by Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris, 1961). Among the exceptions to this generalisation are Martin L. Kilson, Jr., 'Nationalism and Social Classes in British West Africa', in *Journal of Politics* (Gainesville), xx, 2, May 1958, pp. 368–87, and William H. Friedland, 'African Socialism: a sociologist's view', a paper presented at the meeting of the African Studies Association, Washington, 13 October 1962, especially pp. 7–9. I do not mean to imply that a class approach would necessarily yield a more accurate picture, but merely to note a methodological gap in scholarship on African politics.

significant. It is not necessary, however, to be burdened by a static concept of 'class', such as the class categories relevant to Western Europe. Particularly in Africa, where classes are in the formative stages, if they exist at all, the criteria and concepts used to study socio-political affairs must be dynamic and flexible, or their usefulness as tools of analysis will be seriously impaired. On this score, Marxian class categories lose their relevance for African politics.

The gaps between classes may be wider in some societies than in others, but gaps nevertheless exist in African societies which mould political thought and behaviour. We should not permit efforts on the part of the African ruling élites to minimise or 'gloss over' fundamental social cleavages to obscure Africa's underlying socio-political realities. By the same token, simply because the Communist world has paid special attention to the tools of class analysis, the scholar should not be diverted from an objective assessment of the possibilities of a limited or modified class analysis. Perhaps a hard look at post-independence African social systems may indicate that class analysis is not a fruitful avenue for the study of African politics, but such an approach should not be precluded on the strength of its present association with Marxist ideology.

AFRICAN ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE 'CLASS STRUGGLE'

Historically, certain groups in societies have been more conscious of the concept 'nation' and have sought to fortify the nation at the expense of traditionalist forces. In Europe, for example, the efforts of kings to centralise power in their own hands conflicted with feudal interests.¹ Significantly, the greatest feudal landowner, the Church, decided to assist the kings with the tasks of nation-building. In their struggle to build nations, particularly in the later stages of European nationalism, the rulers were supported and often motivated and propelled by the newly emerging bourgeoisie—trained officials, ecclesiastics, lesser nobles, bankers, urban middle classes, professional soldiers, merchants, and artisans.

Similarly, certain groups in African society are more predisposed towards the growth and centralisation of national power than others. Certain people are more determined to build the nation and to take risks to secure that end than others, who think it in their interests to resist and impede the foundation of a strong national state. In West

¹ See Frederick Hertz, *Nationality in History and Politics: a study of the psychology and sociology of national sentiment and character* (London, 1944), pp. 208–11, and ch. vii, 'The Social Background of Modern Nationalism'.

Africa, it is the emergent modernising élite that unfurls the banner of nationalism. The expulsion and withdrawal of the colonial rulers automatically brings this socio-political group to power, since there are no well-organised or politically articulate classes to rival it for internal power.¹

In many respects, the revolutionary nationalist élites display evidences of a basic middle-class character. But African middle-class élites, like those in under-developed countries elsewhere, differ qualitatively from West European and American middle classes, and for this reason westerners have been reluctant to identify them as essentially middle-class régimes. European middle classes have traditionally been property-owning elements with a solid economic base for their social status. The main component of the rudimentary middle classes in the under-developed countries, however, is the bureaucratic intelligentsia. This is composed of various service and professional segments of the population, which developed to meet the demands of the expanded operations of the alien enterprises and the state: civil servants, teachers, professionals, career military officers, white-collar workers, and urban service personnel. Their social status is not a function of the ownership of property, but rather of their special skills and their role in society and government.

According to Professor Vernon Aspaturian, these groups are authentically middle class for at least four reasons: (1) the social functions they perform are traditionally middle-class functions; (2) their primary ideological motivation is nationalistic; (2) they exhibit primarily European middle-class aspirations and values largely because they were educated by Europe's middle classes and therefore they seek to imitate and emulate them; and (4) they do not reject religious norms and principles.² In some territories, notably Ghana, Ivory Coast, and Nigeria, the nationalist middle class also includes some property-owning farmers and planters, and some petty capitalist traders, financiers, and entrepreneurs. But only rarely do such groups constitute the base support for the ruling régimes.

In spite of their own middle-class character, however, some West African ruling élites insist that no classes in the Marxian sense can be found in West Africa. Even if classes were to exist, which most deny, it is argued that they would not or could not be antagonistic, since this is

¹ Aspaturian, *op. cit.* pp. 179-80. There are, of course, exceptions to this, particularly where the British policy of indirect rule served to bolster the power of the land-based traditional authorities, as in Northern Nigeria.

² *Ibid.* pp. 177-9.

supposedly antithetical to both traditional and modern African social patterns. Thus, so the argument runs, Marx's fundamental analytical scheme has little relevance for Africa, and Africa can avoid an impending class struggle which, according to Marxist doctrine, is under certain conditions a universal, integral part of all social progress. Either tacitly or explicitly the basic Marxist-Leninist view of society is spurned as useless in analysing African problems.

President Sékou Touré of Guinea is manifestly concerned with the problems of social classes in West Africa. Much of his rationalisation for single mass-party rule and total national mobilisation of the population and the economy is founded on the premise that the class struggle has no relevance in Africa and can be avoided if desired. Viewing the class struggle in Marxian terms, yet simultaneously denying its existence in Guinea, Touré argues:

... in order for there to be a class struggle, society must first of all be divided into antagonistic classes. What is it that characterises antagonistic classes? It is the relationship of oppression and exploitation that one social class has imposed, in a given society, on another social class. This supposes that one social class holds the means of exploitation and oppression. These means . . . are capital and private ownership of the instruments of production. Hence it is necessary to pose the question: do such conditions exist in the Republic of Guinea, where important sectors of economic activity . . . are under direct control of the State, where land ownership has been abolished, where salaried workers and peasants supremely deliberate and enact their own legislation and where their powers of administration are more expanded?¹

This rhetorical question is designed to convince Guineans that, under such conditions, antagonistic social classes could never survive. Nevertheless, there has been internal social tension in the country. Touré insists that it stems from the presence of 'egotistical interest groups, constituting by nature a reactionary class with bourgeois tendencies', which are trying 'to deceive the people indefinitely'.² Essentially, this is an admission that potential, if not actual, class divisions exist in Guinean society. Referring to trade unionists and government employees as well as to the few remaining foreign commercial interests functioning in Guinea, Touré warns that such 'interest groups' or 'social strata' must not be permitted to destroy Guinea's classless social fabric. By formally rejecting the principle of the class struggle, Touré seeks to bring about a profound internal transformation in Guinea.

¹ This statement appeared in the organ of the *Parti démocratique de Guinée* (P.D.G.), *Horoya* (Conakry), 110, 13 March 1962; Touré's italics.

² Ibid.

But although he eschews the uncritical application of originally western class categories, Touré is among the few Africans who accept a universalised version of the class struggle whereby all under-developed nations are equated with the proletariat and the 'have' nations of Europe and North America with the capitalists. Minor contradictions between social strata are minimised as insignificant compared to the deep rift between colonised and coloniser. President Touré states that 'The anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist struggle represents, in reality, in the framework of a group of nations, the national form of the class struggle between . . . nations which oppress and exploit other peoples and the peoples of the exploited and oppressed nations.'¹ Assane Seck of Senegal has generalised: 'The class struggle shows itself, not in the relationships between [the African middle] class and the African mass, but in the relationships between the whole body of Africans and Europeans.'² In this manner they 'internationalise' the class struggle.

Both men exemplify the highly selective approach of many West Africans to political theory. This approach, for example, seems to embrace a Leninist conception of imperialism, i.e. colonialism, with its world-wide division between exploiting and exploited nations, but rejects Marxist-Leninist notions about domestic social divisions in African society.³ Moreover, the Marxist-Leninist image of social classes has been abstracted from its original context in which class divisions were to cut across artificial national boundaries and stratify societies horizontally, and applied to large, supra-national, geographical groupings. The Marxist concept of the proletariat has been altered to include only peoples of under-developed areas, and, in this particular case, Africa.

Instead of basing his internationalism on illusory trans-national class interests, Touré has built it on common racial and geographical interests. Thus all Europeans are lumped together as 'haves' or exploiting classes, and all Africans are 'have nots', the 'dispossessed', regardless of their individual class status within each nation. No effort is made to call upon class allies in European countries for assistance in the struggle, despite the possibility that Europeans may align themselves with their own class allies in the African countries. This modification is central to Touré's

¹ Sékou Touré, *L'Action politique du parti démocratique de Guinée. La Planification économique. Plan triennal de développement économique et social* (Conakry, 1960), vol. v, p. 384.

² See Thomas Hodgkin, *African Political Parties* (London, 1961), pp. 28-9. Assane Seck is one of the intellectual leaders of Senegal's opposition *Parti du regroupement africain* (P.R.A.).

³ See my articles: 'Nkrumah's Theory of Underdevelopment: an analysis of recurrent themes', in *World Politics* (Princeton), xv, 3, April 1963, pp. 438-54; and 'Marxism-Leninism and African Underdevelopment: the Mali approach', in *International Journal* (Toronto), xvii, 3, Summer 1963, pp. 300-4, for an abbreviated discussion of this point.

view of the class struggle. In some respects it is not unlike one facet of the current Chinese communist position, which on occasion seeks to emphasise the solidarity of the 'coloured' peoples to further their version of the anti-imperialist 'class' struggle.¹ Touré's interpretation of class conflict is important, for he views all African revolutions against foreign colonialists as nothing more than class struggles in a different setting, with the proletariat and capitalists played by different actors.

Madeira Keita, Mali's Minister of Justice, also minimises the importance of social classes in domestic African politics. Regarding Mali's social structure, he emphasises the extremely transitory nature of contemporary social groupings.² Mali's fluid society offers possibilities for national development as well as retardation. In his view, practically no economic base exists for the creation of a bourgeoisie, in the Marxian sense. But, he has said, although 'we obviously cannot assert that Negro African society is a classless society . . . we do say that the differentiation of classes in Africa does not imply a diversification of interests and still less an opposition of interests.'³ Thus, the absence of *hostile* classes, he believes, permits a rapid evolution towards a socialist organisation of the economy and society. In short, the class struggle can be by-passed, even if one admits the existence of social classes.

President Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal, like Madeira Keita, sees African society in a state of flux. According to Senghor there are no social differences based purely on wealth in African society. All Africans are poor. The richest, he says, are the officials, who cannot be called capitalists. He maintains that 'in Senegal there are no classes in the real sense of the word. There are "social groupings"'.⁴ He identifies three large 'groupings' in West Africa: (1) members of the liberal professions—lawyers, doctors, pharmacists, notaries, and even merchants; (2) wage earners—government officials, employees, and labourers; and (3) peasants, shepherds, fishermen, and artisans.⁵ These

¹ Robert A. Scalapino, 'Sino-Soviet Competition in Africa', in *Foreign Affairs* (New York), xlii, 4, July 1964, pp. 650–1.

² Madeira Keita, 'Le Mali et la recherche d'un socialisme africain' (Embassy of the Republic of Mali, Washington, n.d.), pp. 3–4.

³ Madeira Keita, 'The Single Party in Africa', in *Présence africaine* (Paris), ii, 30, 1960, p. 34. See also excerpts from a speech by Seydou Badian Kouyaté, Mali's Minister of Development, to the Dakar Colloquium on African Socialism, reprinted in *Africa Report* (Washington), xiii, 5, May 1963, pp. 15–16.

⁴ Léopold Sédar Senghor, 'The Senegalese Way to Socialism', in *Review of International Affairs* (Beograd), xii, 258, January 1961, p. 5. This view has been expressed by the Ivory Coast's Félix Houphouët-Boigny. See *L'Afrique noire* (Dakar), 6 December 1951; and at the 1957 Constitutive Congress of the U.G.T.A.N. (*Union générale des travailleurs d'Afrique noire*) held at Cotonou, Dahomey, where the leaders abandoned the 'class struggle' theory.

⁵ Léopold Sédar Senghor, *On African Socialism* (New York, 1964), p. 94.

groupings are allegedly less differentiated than in European society, with no rigid barriers between them. All modern economic inequalities, Senghor contends, are products of the colonial system. He recognises a 'real movement' toward the formation of classes, but 'This stratification into antagonistic classes has only begun; it can still be stopped.'¹

Although no 'classes' can be found in Senegalese society, according to Senghor, the germ for their growth has been planted, and it is for the Government to try to mitigate antagonisms between groupings. To say that Senegal is 'classless' is not the same as saying that there is no social hierarchy or inequality of wealth. The so-called caste system, which largely cuts across tribal lines, may well evolve and crystallise into a class-like stratification. In addition, social divisions based on wealth have been introduced by the French in the urbanised areas. To deny the existence of and competition between social groups is largely erroneous. The question is, Do these groups constitute fundamentally antagonistic socio-economic classes?²

President Julius Nyerere of Tanganyika likewise regards 'class' as a concept wholly alien to Africa. For example, he maintains that 'African socialism . . . did not start from the existence of conflicting "classes" in society. Indeed, I doubt if the word "class" exists in an indigenous African language: for language describes the ideas of those who speak it, and the idea of "class" or "caste" was non-existent in African society.' In another instance, as if to emphasise this point, he wrote, 'With rare exceptions the idea of class is something entirely foreign to Africa. Here, in this continent, the nationalist movements are fighting a battle of freedom from foreign domination, not from domination by any ruling class of our own.'³ Nyerere, however, is even less willing to admit the presence of social divisions, least of all antagonistic classes, even though he implies that they may have been spawned by non-African forces during the colonial years.

Few Nigerian leaders in power ever mention social classes or the presence of antagonistic class interests in their countries. They sedulously avoid the introduction of any concept which might tend to damage Nigeria's regional and tribal political balance. However, two opposition political parties, the Northern Elements Progressive Union (N.E.P.U.)

¹ Léopold Sédar Senghor, 'A Community of Free and Equal Peoples with the Mother Country', in *Western World* (Brussels), 18, October 1958, p. 40. Similar thoughts have been advanced by Nyerere and quoted by Friedland, 'African Socialism', p. 9.

² For further background to this question, see René Dumont, *L'Afrique noire est mal partie* (Paris, 1962).

³ Julius Nyerere, 'Ujamaa': the basis of African socialism (Dar es Salaam, 1962), and his 'One Party System of Government in Africa', in *Voice of Africa*, II, 5, May 1962, p. 21.

and the Action Group of the Western Region, willingly attribute Nigeria's political, economic, and social illnesses to the presence of contradictory class interests in society. N.E.P.U. is a radical reaction to the inherent conservatism of the ruling Northern People's Congress (N.P.C.). Its policies and ultimate objectives are firmly founded on a class analysis of politics. In the Declaration of Principles which appeared before the October 1952 election, N.E.P.U. uncompromisingly attacked the endemic system of Emirs and native authorities. In the Marxist-Leninist language of the class struggle, it accused the traditional land-owning aristocracy of oppressing and exploiting the masses:

... there is today in our society an antagonism of interests, manifesting itself as a class struggle, between the members of that vicious circle of the Native Administrations on the one hand and the ordinary 'Talakawa' [commoners] on the other ... All parties are but the expression of class interests, and as the interest of the 'Talakawa' is diametrically opposed to the interest of all sections of the master class, the party seeking the emancipation of the 'Talakawa' must naturally be hostile to the party of the oppressors ...¹

It follows that the *Talakawa*, represented by N.E.P.U., must 'organise consciously and politically for the conquest of the powers of Government'. What is described is principally a pre-capitalist class conflict—a clash between the 'feudal' aristocracy and the commoners. Its application to Northern Nigeria is quite valid, and the ruling Hausa-Fulani political organisation, the N.P.C., has been forced to contend with a group which is extremely revolutionary for the Moslem North.

Similarly, the post-1960 Action Group has based its political re-emergence on the formation and growth of social classes in contemporary Nigeria. A large portion of the 1960 Action Group manifesto entitled 'Democratic Socialism' is devoted to an analysis of existing and emerging classes. Exhibiting an unrefined Marxist orientation, it asserts:

This new society already has clearly discernible classes and social strata each anxious to protect and enhance its own interest. These classes and social strata, in most cases, cut across the traditional barriers of religion and nationality. New loyalties to class interests are gradually replacing the traditional loyalties to religion, nationality, and nobility. More important still, the clash of interests between these classes and social strata increasingly provides the motive forces of the political life of the new Nigeria ...

In its nakedness, politics is a clash of economic interests. Political programmes and arguments are at bottom the objectives and views of definite

¹ The N.E.P.U. Party of Northern Nigeria, *Declaration of Principles*, as quoted in Thomas Hodgkin, 'A Note on the Language of African Nationalism', in *St. Antony's Papers*, No. 10, *African Affairs: Number One* (London, 1961), pp. 37-8.

economic classes and groups. Therefore a scientific formulation of a party political programme must start with a careful examination of the economic interests of the various classes and groups that make up the society . . . it is equally essential to know along what lines the various economic classes and interests are likely to develop.

The manifesto notes three distinct incipient classes in Nigeria: (1) the 'self-employed', the bulk of the people; (2) the 'workers', those earning wages and salaries; and (3) the 'employers', which includes the state, private and public corporations, industrialists, merchants, and contractors.¹ Although it calls for more Nigerians to join the employer class, the manifesto urges the Action Group, as a 'political party of the common people', to 'project and protect the best interests of the first two classes . . . and reflect their true aspirations'. The manifesto anticipates class realignments and predicts that the uncharted development of the capitalist system of production, distribution, and exchange, as allegedly fostered by the N.P.C.-N.C.N.C. Government, will tend to destroy the small self-employed businessman and increase the strength of the working classes. This, it is thought, will 'deepen the class antagonisms' between the rich and the poor. The Action Group concludes that to survive it must throw its support to the growing political and economic force in the country—the working class.²

The general view that Africa is classless and yet suffers from friction among diverse social strata has also been expressed repeatedly by President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. Until recently governmental criticisms were aimed at what had been vaguely identified as 'reactionaries', 'counter-revolutionaries', 'imperialists', and 'imperialist stooges'. But early in 1964 the Government began to speak more frequently of 'class enemies', and there was a new emphasis on the 'class struggle' in Ghana. Government radio, and the press controlled by the militant wing of the Convention People's Party, called for the expulsion of 'capitalists' from the centres of state power. A front-page editorial in the semi-official *Ghanaian Times*, entitled 'We are at War—Capitalist

¹ Action Group Bureau of Information, *Democratic Socialism: being the manifesto of the Action Group of Nigeria for an independent Nigeria* (Lagos, 1960), pp. 5 and 7. Viewing Nigerian society along class lines is not a recent addition to Action Group thought. Obafemi Awolowo, party leader since its inception, wrote in 1945 that there were three classes in Nigeria. At that time, however, he differentiated between: (1) the 'educated classes consisting of the professional men and women, teachers, and clerks'; (2) 'the "enlightened" classes consisting mainly of traders and artisans'; and (3) 'the ignorant masses'. He went on to discuss them in some detail and specifically their actual and potential roles in Nigerian politics. See his *Path to Nigerian Freedom* (London, 1947), pp. 31-2. But the 1945 categories were based largely on educational differences; those of 1960 were founded on economic divisions. This was a fundamental innovation.

² *Democratic Socialism*, pp. 6-7 and 8-10.

Class Must be Crushed', declared that 'Some of our political scientists had served us the false doctrine that Ghana is fortunate to be starting its socialist revolution without basic class antagonisms.' Warning that this was a 'dangerous fallacy', it continued, 'Our aim is a revolutionary democracy headed by a revolutionary proletariat.'¹ This, indeed, is a significant alteration in Ghanaian political ideology, and one which will probably have broad repercussions in the theory and practice of one-party rule in that state.

For the most part, however, Africans have either ignored, or denied the validity of, class arguments and class conflicts in African life. A few are coming to recognise an embryonic class development in the continent, but this can be traced to the introduction, they say, of capitalism. Only a few—the leaders of the C.P.P., the N.E.P.U., and the Action Group, for example—are willing to base their policies and political strategies and tactics on class analyses of social forces.

COMMUNIST PERSPECTIVES ON THE CLASS STRUGGLE IN AFRICA

What is the current Communist attitude towards class conflict in the under-developed world, and particularly in Africa? Despite variegated mutations in Soviet ideology over nearly half a century, the class struggle still constitutes one of the fundamental pillars of Marxism-Leninism. Current Russian writers on Africa attempt to apply class categories and only reluctantly modify or adapt them to African social realities.

A number of recent Russian policy pronouncements have more or less acknowledged that although class contradictions can be found in Africa, a progressive 'national bourgeoisie', in so far as it is 'anti-feudal' and 'anti-imperialistic', can co-operate with the 'healthy forces of the nation'. This state, it is alleged, reflects the interests of not just one class, but of several broad strata of the people.² However, in keeping with traditional Marxist-Leninist doctrine, it is maintained that:

The working class is the most consistent fighter for the consummation of this [national-liberation] revolution, for national interests and social progress. As industry develops, its ranks will swell and its role on the socio-political scene will increase. The alliance of the working class and the peasantry is the fundamental condition for the success of the struggle to carry out far-reaching democratic changes and achieve economic and social progress.

¹ Quoted in the *New York Times* (Western edition), 7 and 9 January 1964.

² The Washington Centre of Foreign Policy Research, *Two Communist Manifestoes* (Washington, 1961), pp. 66–79.

This alliance must form the core of a broad national front . . . The national front embraces the working class, the peasantry, the national bourgeoisie and the democratic intelligentsia.¹

In his 1960 booklet, *Africa Looks Ahead*, the late Dr I. Potekhin, perhaps the foremost Russian Africanist, attempted to refute the claim by various Africans that African society is classless.² Admitting that class formation is still in progress, he accused exponents of 'African socialism' of underestimating the importance of class differentiations in Africa. With the exception of the emirates of Nigeria and the kingdom of Buganda in Uganda, he noted that no class of feudalists opposes the peasants, that no private feudal landownership exists, and that peasant communes possess the bulk of the land. Still, he contended, a tribal aristocracy controls most communal land, uses feudal and semi-feudal exploitation of the masses, and profits by its privileged position. Although not true feudalism, Potekhin wrote, it is a patriarchal type of feudalism.³

Writing more recently, Potekhin modified his views on feudalism. In 1963 he noted, for example, that in the Maghreb, Libya, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Uganda, 'private feudal land ownership' prevails. A pattern which he called 'state feudal land ownership', because tax is substituted for rent, ostensibly exists in Northern Nigeria, parts of Western Nigeria, Upper Volta, and Northern Cameroon, and in Barotseland. Although, in his view, the institution of private (bourgeois) land ownership has expanded in Africa of late, this tendency is largely rudimentary, for communal land ownership is still widespread in most of independent tropical Africa. Because of this, 'In the great majority of African countries, the class differentiation of the *peasantry* is still insignifi-

¹ Communist Party of the Soviet Union, *Programme of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: adopted by the 22nd Congress of the C.P.S.U., October 31, 1961* (Moscow, 1961), p. 45.

² I. I. Potekhin, 'Africa's Future: the Soviet view—an abridgement of I. I. Potekhin's booklet *Afrika Smotrit V Buduschcheye* ('Africa Looks Ahead') published by Izdatel'syva Vostochnoy, Moscow, 1960', supplement with *Mizan Newsletter* (London), III, 4, April 1961, pp. 3-4.

³ Potekhin, of course, employed the Marxist historical analysis, in which feudalism is regarded as one of the three pre-capitalist stages of economic development. This approach is bound up with land ownership by the lord, and his partial ownership of the serf peasant. But African feudalism, to be a useful analytical designation, must be divorced from reference to land ownership. The feudal relationship, if it can be applied to tropical Africa at all, is essentially an interpersonal association based on an unequal political relationship of super- and sub-ordination—protection on one hand, service on the other. For more extended discussion of this point, see two articles by Jacques J. Maquet, 'A Research Definition of African Feudality', in *The Journal of African History* (Cambridge), III, 2, 1962, pp. 307-10; and also 'Une hypothèse pour l'étude des féodalités africaines', in *Cahiers d'études africaines* (Paris), 6, 1961, pp. 292-314. Jack Goody challenges the utility of the term as applied to Africa in 'Feudalism in Africa', in *The Journal of African History*, IV, 1, 1963, pp. 1-18; see especially his useful bibliography, pp. 16-18.

cant.'¹ But the growth of a prosperous national bourgeoisie led him to conclude that 'It is utterly impossible to call modern African society classless.'²

Potekhin also saw a widening hiatus between the African national bourgeoisie and the developing proletariat. A class-conscious proletariat, he maintained, is necessary for the transition to a socialist society. Although the proletariat is admittedly small, a skeletal working class is rapidly expanding in size and political awareness. The presence of foreign-owned industries in Africa and the development of state-run national industry as well as small-scale, privately-owned, indigenous industry will speed the process. It will only be the existence of a foreign imperialist bourgeoisie which can keep the African bourgeoisie and working class united in the continued struggle for total independence. Here is a fundamental difference between Soviet and African élite thinking on the class struggle. Although the middle-class élites engage in what is essentially a class conflict with feudal-like traditional forces, they call it a struggle for modernisation. They completely reject the notion that some day there may be conflict between the élite and the peasantry and growing proletariat.

Other Soviet writers follow the line set by Potekhin. They see African society as a complicated admixture of tribal, feudal, and capitalist elements. Generally, they are intent upon demonstrating that classes are inherent in African society. Potekhin explicitly took issue with African ideologists on this question, and other Soviet writers try to reinforce his argument against the belief that Africa is unique and thus can deny the Marxist-Leninist class struggle. Perhaps Soviet scholars are looking beyond the initial stage of post-independence solidarity to a later day when class conflicts may well mark the normal pattern of Africa's political development.³

Although clinging to their traditional concept of the class struggle as universally applicable to all peoples in all stages of development, Soviet statesmen and Africanists appear willing to modify or de-emphasise this fundamental premise, in an effort to bridge the ideological gap. Thus, their modulation of the doctrine of the class struggle as applied to some parts of Africa appears to be an effort to rid themselves of what is, at the

¹ I. I. Potekhin, 'Land Relations in African Countries', in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (Cambridge), 1, 1, March 1963, p. 39.

² I. I. Potekhin, 'On African Socialism: a Soviet View', in William H. Friedland and Carl G. Rosberg, Jr. (eds.), *African Socialism* (Stanford, 1964), p. 110.

³ 'Classes in African Society', in *Mizan Newsletter*, III, 6, June 1961, pp. 18-23. See, for example, articles by M. I. Braginsky, V. Ya. Katsman, and A. S. Orlova, which appeared in *Sovetskaya Ethnografiya* (Moscow), no. 6 of 1960 and no. 1 of 1961.

moment, an ideological and political liability. Still, the Soviet image of African society has not found acceptance among influential Africans. African leaders, with few exceptions, either doggedly deny the presence of identifiable classes or insist that they can avoid class antagonisms. Both Russian and African leaders see class distinctions in gestation. The former predict their magnification. The Africans demand their mollification or elimination. This does not mean that Africa's ruling élites will persist in their beliefs, for their conceptions of the class struggle are themselves undergoing change. As African societies modernise, so African ideologies can be expected to be qualified, adjusted, or transformed.



Historically, virtually all ruling groups attempt to deny the existence of domestic or internal social conflict. One manifestation of this has been the insistence that their societies are 'classless'. The Russians maintain the fiction that social classes and groups in the Soviet Union do not have conflicting interests. Likewise, American politicians are determined to perpetuate the belief that politics in their country have never been class-oriented. For essentially the same reasons Africans insist that social class struggle is not a threat in Africa, although they admit that domestic politics often pit what they euphemistically label competing 'social strata' and 'interest groups' against one another. In short, the denial of the presence of antagonistic social classes is a device utilised by ruling élites to bolster their régimes. This device is, to a large extent, a product of what Talcott Parsons has called the 'cognitive distortion of ideologies'.¹ A primary function of ideology, from the standpoint of ruling groups, is to integrate the social system. Hence, where there is an element of disintegration in the social structure, in this case social classes, the tendency will be for the leaders to 'play it down' or minimise its importance. To 'face up' to the existence of antagonistic social classes in society threatens the stability of the system. The leaders, in effect, rationalise such 'flaws' in the social fabric.

Revolutionary régimes determined to overthrow the established order are, quite naturally, more predisposed to accept the class-struggle thesis, or perhaps a crude class method of analysis. They can comfortably contend that social inequities reflect class divisions in their countries. After all, the class struggle (or its repudiation) is itself an ideological and political weapon to be used selectively to further one's cause. African revolutionaries have been less inclined to accept class arguments than

¹ Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (Glencoe, 1951), pp. 356-8.

revolutionaries in other emerging areas, simply because class categories apparently have less validity and utility for African politics than they may have elsewhere, for instance in the Middle East or parts of Latin America. When they do employ a class analysis, they usually maintain that class divisions are a modern feature introduced by alien political and economic forces.

Although most ruling élites do not publicly speak the language of the class struggle, they are not unaware of major social groupings and the political possibilities of social tensions and stratifications in their countries. Politicians the world over almost instinctively assess significant domestic pressures and interests to determine their relative strengths and weaknesses. If they failed to weigh or inaccurately judged domestic power relationships they would not be able to retain power for long, particularly in dynamic societies such as those of West Africa. Thus, for power holders or those ambitious for power, a healthy regard for and knowledge of internal social, economic, and political configurations is a necessary skill, regardless of whether the analysis is couched in class terms, or in the language of interest groups, or in the less systematic and more pedestrian colloquialisms of domestic politics.